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ABSTRACT

Group activities in the classroom can be a useful way to explore various standard rhetorical patterns. For descriptive writing, students can select and write about unsigned collages made by classmates. The writer can try to find a unifying theme that characterizes the artist's personality. A narrative component can be added to descriptive writing by dividing the class into three groups and by having each group work independently to create a setting, a cast of characters, and action. The three disjointed contributions can then be merged through chalkboard arbitration into a single dramatic scene. A third activity, which results in description, dialogue, and anecdote, involves an interview with a person whose one-line description the class has found most intriguing. Finally, to introduce argument, students can be divided into three or four groups and assigned a common topic. A "secretary" can write down fellow class members' evidence in support and in refutation of the argument. Almost invariably, the resulting essays will be more sophisticated than they would have been without benefit of the authors' committee experience. (HTH)

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INTRODUCING RHETORICAL PATTERNS THROUGH GROUP ACTIVITIES

Tom Mack

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INTRODUCING RHETORICAL PATTERNS THROUGH GROUP ACTIVITIES

Writing is, of course, a largely solitary process, but the very fact that we persist in teaching it in a classroom setting necessitates some sort of group interaction. Such activity, I have discovered, is most useful in the generation of topics and in the initial exploration of the various standard rhetorical patterns. For the next twenty minutes, I will be sharing with you group activities that I have developed as a means of introducing a variety of compositional strategies.

Let us begin with description, the kind of writing most composition teachers choose to tackle first; it is with description that I begin forming a sense of classroom community by organizing student duos. During the initial week of class, each student is asked to create a collage entitled "ME." He must use posterboard, roughly one foot by two, and thereon assemble visual and verbal clues to his identity. Most students use magazine and newspaper pictures, captions, and headlines; some have employed personal photographs and drawings; and still others have affixed bottle caps, labels, ticket stubs, coasters, prize ribbons and even live ammunition. The finished products are then displayed on the chalkboard trays around the room, and each student is asked to select one that he or she finds alluring.

The collage recipient then becomes its interpreter by being asked to write a paragraph based on the assembled evidence he finds before him. Out of all the visual images and verbal clues, the observer must seek a unifying factor with which to focus his written interpretation of the collagist's inner self. Perhaps he will discover that the artist is "daring" and back up that assertion by referring to the prevalence of red items in the collage, red sportscars speeding down slick highways and red-jerseyed football players making risky plays. Or perhaps the writer will discover, as one of my students

did this fall, that her collagist is "fun-loving" because of the predominance of colorful tickets and photos: the pink stub from the Lover Boy concert and the bright green one from the Aiken Trials, the black and orange snapshot from a Halloween party, and the bright blue photo of a Myrtle Beach sky.

I have found this initial exercise to be an excellent icebreaker and a fine first writing assignment. It overcomes many of the barriers to direct personal revelation by letting visual objects serve as an individual's first communication to an unknown classmate; in short, the collage does the talking. In addition, it introduces both inductive reasoning by asking each writer to discover a pattern of images from which to form an interpretation and also the deductive process by asking that same writer to produce a paragraph that begins with an assertion and substantiates it with a wealth of concrete detail.

From this initial pairing of classmates, I branch out to larger groups, still exploring the possibilities of descriptive writing but this time with a narrative component. In an exercise that involves what I call "scene making," the class is divided into three groups; one group works on providing a setting, another develops a cast of not-more-than-three characters, and the third supplies the action. Each of these groups works independently of the others; their three predictably disjointed contributions are then merged through chalkboard arbitration into one paragraph that it is hoped will present a single, concrete, dramatic scene. In a freshman class last spring, the committee on setting described a little clearing in the woods; the committee on characters created two policemen, one honest and the other subject to the temptation represented by a sultry, bankrobbing female; the committee on action wanted violence. Through chalkboard arbitration, the entire class easily concocted a scenario wherein the less-than-dedicated police officer falls for the attractive crook who spurs him on to incapacitate her other, honest guardian. This sterling officer has,

in the meantime, sensed mounting collusion between the forces of law and those of disorder, and what ensues is a wrestling match to the death, a classic grappling between lust and duty. After this group experience, the class members are then assigned scene-making topics; each individual must describe, for example, his own most exciting or frightening or exotic experience, being sure to include the tripartite ingredients of setting, characters, and action.

Another exercise that I employ around midsemester, one that builds on the descriptive writing from the beginning of the course, is an interview paper. To select a suitable subject for each student's attention, I ask each class member to bring in a sheet of paper listing the three most interesting people he knows and why; the rest of the class will then listen to the one-sentence description of each interview candidate and vote for the one they find most appealing and most worthy of full-length treatment. Some examples from last spring's class include a navy veteran stationed at Pearl Harbor during the Japanese surprise attack in 1941; a mother who, in essence, kidnapped her own child from her estranged husband, who had been given court custody; and a prison inmate sentenced for knifing another man during a bar fight. The importance of these one-line descriptions in the popular voting process forces each student to focus his work from the outset; the "winning" one-line statement serves as the thesis of each student's completed theme.

The resulting essays, which involve description, dialogue, and anecdote, extend the learning experience beyond the classroom as each student goes out to gather information from and about his designated target. Members of the greater community are thus directly involved in at least one small mission of the University. In my local supermarket, for example, I was once confronted by a woman shopper who was bursting to tell me that she had been the subject of a recent student interview and that she had felt more special ever since.

The last and possibly the most sophisticated pattern I tackle is argument, for which I generally spend about three class periods to prepare my students. I first set up three or four groups and assign all of them a common topic, such as "The State Capital Should be Relocated." Each group secretary is then charged with writing down his fellow members' evidence in support and in refutation of the argument. The greatest benefit of this group introduction to argumentation is that students get to test their own ideas on others and also witness how others would handle the same problem before each is told to set off alone with the formal writing assignment.

I have found that the resulting essay is almost invariably more sophisticated than it would have been had each student not had the committee experience to help him build more confidence in his persuasive abilities. This past summer, for example, on the subsequent topic "My Hometown Should be the State Capital," one student argued convincingly for establishing Hodges, South Carolina (population 526) as the new capital hamlet; after all, he asserted, Hodges has no bars to lure legislators away from their appointed tasks, no scarcity of space for government buildings, and no lack of small town gossips to keep an eye on any suspected legislative hanky-panky.

Thus, it has been my experience that before a teacher sends a student off with paper and pen and a formal writing assignment, he would be wise to introduce any unexplored compositional strategy with some form of class interaction; I hope that the four suggestions that I have outlined in this paper will serve as inspiration toward that end.

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INTRODUCING RHETORICAL PATTERNS THROUGH GROUP ACTIVITIES

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DESCRIPTION

COLLAGIST

"ME" COLLAGE → INDUCTIVE NOTETAKING → DOMINANT CHARACTERISTIC ↓ CONCRETE DETAILS

INTERPRETER

FORMAL WRITING ASSIGNMENT

EXAMINATION OF COLLAGE FOR A PATTERN OF IMAGES FROM WHICH TO MAKE A GENERALIZATION

DEDUCTIVE ORGANIZATION

DESCRIPTION/NARRATION I

setting group
character group
action group
→ CHALKBOARD ARBITRATION → CLASS-PRODUCED SCENE → SETTING CHARACTERS ACTION

INDIVIDUAL FORMAL WRITING ASSIGNMENT

MOST EXCITING, FRIGHTENING, OR EXOTIC EXPERIENCE

DESCRIPTION/NARRATION II

EACH STUDENT'S LIST

THE THREE MOST INTERESTING PEOPLE I KNOW
1. X, RATIONALE
2. Y, RATIONALE
3. Z, RATIONALE

→ GROUP DISCUSSION AND SELECTION → INTRODUCTION DESCRIPTION DIALOGUE ANECDOTE CONCLUSION

EACH STUDENT'S FORMAL INTERVIEW OF PERSON SELECTED BY CLASS

ONE-LINE DESCRIPTIONS

ARGUMENT

GROUP DISCUSSION → Argument:

PRO	CON
1. ___ (N)	1. ___ (N)
2. ___ (N)	2. ___ (N)
3. ___ (N)	3. ___ (N)

GROUP REPORT BY COMMITTEE SECRETARY

ARGUMENT: THE STATE CAPITAL SHOULD BE RELOCATED

→ ARGUMENT ↓ THREE PROOFS

INDIVIDUAL FORMAL WRITING ASSIGNMENT

ARGUMENT: MY HOMETOWN SHOULD BE THE NEW STATE CAPITAL